

Excerpt from Speech Delivered by
Commissioner Gracia Hillman
U.S. Election Assistance Commission

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And perhaps, the greatest similarity is our respective devotion to our cultures. For we truly understand that “Losing the memory of the past means present failure of the future.”

And this brings us to Democracy in America. We enjoy life in the greatest Democracy in the world because of the wealth of our nation. Yet we have endured many indignities and inequities along the way.

Our similarity is our struggle to be unique Creole people in America. America's history is the expectation of assimilation rather than the acceptance of diversity.

Our difference is between those Creoles who have always been in America and the Creoles who came here as 20th century immigrants.

Democracy in America is predicated on the belief that the governed shall determine who will govern. We make that determination by voting for our elected officials.

Yet, throughout all of the 20th century, people who were not white, educated men had to struggle and protest for the right to vote. And even today, there are struggles to make certain that all citizens, regardless of race, economic status or physical disability, have an equal voice that is fully counted in our electoral process.

Our similarity is our ability to overcome those trials and tribulations. We have been guided through these struggles in large measure by the strength of our culture, by the belief in our heritage, and by the knowledge of our contributions to America. We have the courage of our Creole convictions.

Cape Verdeans continue to immigrate to America for the opportunity to have a better life. America owes that opportunity to its citizens and its immigrant residents. For we help make this country the great economic powerhouse and Democracy that it is. We owe it to ourselves and to our communities to make certain that all is right in America.

We have two tools to help us be an effective voice in Democracy. We have the Voting Rights Act and the Help America Vote Act. There is a bridge to Democracy between these two important laws.

The bridge is not useful or effective unless both ends of the span are in good working order. It is our job – your job and my job – to use these tools to help strengthen Democracy in America.

There are many avenues available to us on this road called Democracy. The big one that Americans must travel is the Avenue called VOTE. In 2004, over 40 percent of eligible American citizens did NOT vote for President of the United States. Think about that. Almost half of the voters of this great nation took a pass and did not help decide who would be the next President.

I submit to you that the single greatest threat to Democracy in America is low voter turnout.

In closing, let me leave you with this thought.

“I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter. After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can only rest for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended.”

That quote from Nelson Mandela is a reminder to me of my purpose in life.

My friends, our long walk is not yet ended because losing the memory of the past means present failure of the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you tonight.

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